

Indian rail accident kills more than 120

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At least 127 people were killed and more than 200 injured early Sunday morning when 14 carriages from the Patna-Indore Express train suddenly derailed at Pukhrayan, about 100 kilometres from Kanpur in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The train was carrying over 500 passengers.

The disaster highlights the poor safety conditions and lack of maintenance in India's massive railway network. The death toll—the highest from an Indian rail accident in the past six years—is expected to increase as rescue workers gain full access to two of the derailed carriages. “Many more passengers are still trapped,” Anil Saxena, a senior railway official in New Delhi, told Reuters yesterday.

Yaqoob Ahmed, one of those admitted to Kanpur's UHM hospital, told the *Hindustan Times*: “I woke up suddenly, at around 3:10 a.m. and felt a tremor. The train came to a screeching halt. All of a sudden, I was crushed under a crowd of people... everyone was screaming for help.”

Faizal Khan was travelling with his wife and two children, all of whom survived the accident. He said: “Suddenly I could feel the carriage overturning. I immediately held onto the metal rod near the bathroom door.” Rajdeep Tanwar, another survivor said: “I can see bodies lying near the tracks, everyone is in a state of shock. There is no water or food for us.”

While it is not yet known what triggered the disaster, some reports suggest it was caused by a fracture in the railway line. Suresh Prabhu, India's railway minister, tweeted on Sunday that the “strictest possible action will be taken against those who could be responsible for the accident.” In reality, Indian authorities, as they have done before, will attempt to find scapegoats in order to divert attention from their own negligence toward basic safety standards.

Several senior officials from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government have

suggested that the disaster was the result of a “conspiracy.”

Murli Manohar Joshi, a senior party leader and the MP for Kanpur, claimed the accident was part of an attempt to defame the railways and the government.

Railway Minister Prabhu said the government would launch an immediate investigation into the derailment. Numerous official inquiries have been held following similar train disasters. None has produced any serious improvements in basic railway safety, and the death toll continues to rise. Reports calling for maintenance improvements and rigorous safety checks and procedures have been ignored by successive Indian governments.

In an attempt to contain popular anger over Sunday's disaster, senior Indian government officials and the relevant state administrations have feigned concern, shedding crocodile tears and announcing compensation payments for the victims. Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted that he was “anguished beyond words” on the loss of lives.

The Modi government will pay just 200,000 rupees (\$US3,225) to the relatives of those killed, along with 200,000 rupees from the Madhya Pradesh state government and 500,000 rupees from the Uttar Pradesh state government. The three governments agreed to pay 50,000 rupees to each of those seriously injured and 25,000 rupees for those with minor injuries.

Congress Party leader Madhu Yashki Goud denounced the Modi government over the accident. “The prime minister is busy travelling to Japan and talking about bullet trains but his tenure has ignored railway safety,” he said. “This is an utter failure by the railways minister.”

Another Congress leader, Ahmed Patel, condemned the government's refusal to guarantee basic railway safety standards. “There are over 1.22 lakh (122,000) vacant positions in the railways with 75 percent of

these pertaining to safety,” he said.

However, the dangerous state of India’s railway network, including the run-down of safety jobs, is a direct product of successive Congress and BJP governments that have refused to provide the necessary funds. Rail passengers are the tragic victims.

The Indian railway system is the world’s fourth largest and one of the oldest. Carrying more than 20 million people and 1.49 million tonnes of freight each day, it is notorious for derailments, collisions and other accidents. Most of these are caused by poor maintenance and the lack of safety upgrades.

The number of fatal train accidents has risen sharply since the 1980s. In the fiscal year 2013–2014, 54 people died in 71 accidents, whilst in 2014–2015 the death toll rose to 123 in 80 accidents.

The High-Level Safety Review Committee, which was established by the railway ministry, warned in 2012 that the Indian Railways were “at the brink of [financial] collapse unless measures are taken.” The committee blamed the rail authorities for not taking “concrete measures” and for covering up the role of governments in failing to allocate sufficient funds. According to some analysts, the railways need 20 trillion rupees (\$293.34 billion) investment by 2020.

The Modi government has cynically exploited the financial problems confronting the Indian Railways—a crisis it has exacerbated—to push ahead with plans to privatise the system and allowing 100 percent foreign direct investment in the rail sector.

Privatisation of the rail network and the drive for profit will result in the destruction of thousands of jobs, elimination of working conditions and a further deterioration of maintenance and safety standards—precisely the processes that produced Sunday’s disaster.



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